

Rehberg backs revised SCHIP bill

By NOELLE STRAUB - Lee Washington Bureau - 09/25/07 – Helena Independent Record

WASHINGTON— Although he opposed a previous version of the legislation, Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., plans to vote Tuesday in favor of a bill expanding the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

Rehberg will be taking a stand contrary to President Bush, who has vowed to veto the measure.

"I think it is a sensible, reasonable compromise," Rehberg said of the bill in a telephone interview.

Last month Rehberg voted against a more costly version of the legislation. That measure would have increased spending on the program by \$50 billion over five years, paid for partly by boosting the cigarette tax by 45 cents a pack and by cutting extra payments to private Medicare Advantage plans.

Seeking to pass a compromise before SCHIP expires Sept. 30, House leaders agreed to drop many of the provisions in their original bill and pass a bill that resembles the Senate's version.

Rehberg said he will support that compromise new measure, which raises spending by \$35 billion, focuses solely on SCHIP and pays for it with a cigarette tax increase of 61 cents a pack.

"Those (lawmakers) that were working on the compromise agreed with some of the concerns I had with the House bill as well," Rehberg said.

He added that he has only seen a summary of the compromise presented by the Finance Committee on Friday and wants to see the final bill. But he added, "If the deal holds, I can agree with the changes."

In a guest editorial last month, Rehberg outlined his objections to the House bill and said the Senate bill, while not perfect, was a much more common-sense plan.

Rehberg noted Monday that the compromise does not spend as much as the House version and does not "pit seniors against children" by cutting the Medicare Advantage program.

The new bill also allows coverage for children 18 or younger, rather than 21 as in the House version. "I have major concerns with not driving people from private insurance to this program," Rehberg said.

Rehberg also said the House bill "would have allowed an opportunity to cover illegal aliens, and that's just not acceptable."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi "and her minions in the House" had carried the SCHIP idea to an extreme, Rehberg said. "I think the House of Representatives will have agreed with (my) position that they took it too far, they tried to step down the path of universal health care," he said.

But he also said the rhetoric coming from Bush "is taking a hard line" at the other extreme. He said the administration "helped create much of the problem" because the Health and Human Services Department granted waivers to some states to cover adults.

"Once you get a taste for a government program, get signed up and then see it being taken away, it creates a lot of opposition," Rehberg said. "I don't think his own agency and he were communicating."

SCHIP is a federal-state program to help children whose families don't qualify for Medicaid but cannot afford private health insurance.